

It's Smart To Be Gallery Wise!

THE WILLIAM ROCKHILL NELSON GALLERY OF ART
AND ATKINS MUSEUM OF FINE ARTSNEWS FLASHES

March 1,

1937

MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH: It is with justifiable pride that we announce the Masterpiece for March, which is the first major acquisition for the year 1937. A Portrait of a Peasant by Vincent Van Gogh, it dates from the Dutch period and as far as is known, is the first painting from these early years to be acquired by a public or private collection in America. Canvases of this date are far more rare and less known than later works and in the exhibition of works by the artist that recently traveled the country, they received the greatest attention and many felt them the finest from the painter's brush.

It is a work of the winter of 1884-85 when Vincent was living with his parents in Neunen. His seemingly complete failure as a missionary to the miners in the Borinage was behind him. So too, were his months spent at The Hague when he learned from his cousin Anton Mauve that he could never be a successful artist because he could not paint pretty pictures. He had been further disillusioned and bittered by the disastrous love affair with Kay and the refusal of the world to understand his relationship with the woman of the gutter, Christine, whom he had taken into his life. Even Theo seemed at this stage to have deserted him in his unwillingness to join Vincent in a peasant existence in Drenthe, where the artist had withdrawn because it was less expensive than The Hague.

First the artist was attracted by the weavers who worked in their dim rooms over their great looms. He soon made friends with them and they did not seem to mind the shaggy stranger who sat quietly in the corner and sketched them as they bent over their red and blue cloth. Then when spring came he saw for the first time the potato diggers working in the fields and he was reminded of his god, Millet, who had glorified the peasant of France. The De Groot family lived near by and eked out a poor existence planting, raising, digging potatoes. The humble vegetable was their chief food, and one evening he came upon them as they were eating their simple fare by the light of a single lamp. The Rembrandt quality of the scene appealed to him and he decided he must paint it.

In his first attempts the heads bothered him and immediately he saw his winter's work outlined, "for my study I must paint fifty heads, as soon as possible and one after the other". He searched the town of Neunen for models and even writes Theo the kind he wants, "if I could only get fit models, just the type I want, rough, flat faces, with low foreheads and thick lips, not sharp but full and Millet-like". He made friends with a peasant youth and went on long expeditions with him hunting wrens' nests. It very well may be that we have here a portrait of this companion.

He is not beautiful. His features are heavy, with sunken cheeks, a bulbous nose, thick lips, and there is an almost bovine expression of resignation in his large brown eyes. He is dressed in a cap and a fustian jacket that were once black, but which have faded to a dull green in the sun and rain. He stares out at one with a trusting yet slightly quizzical gaze; his friend has asked him to pose, he is not quite sure why but he knows that it must be all right because Vincent is such a good friend of all the potato diggers. There is the uncomplaining patience and endurance of centuries in his face, and an almost appealing and sensitive quality that overcomes the heaviness of the features.

Van Gogh has used here the simple palette of his Neunen period. He himself likened it to "soft soap green and the brass colour of a wornout ten centime piece", but he was searching for form and felt he could achieve it best by employing almost a monochrome. He wanted to paint the peasants from the very earth that they tilled, and he realized that years of working in the fields gave their features "the colours of a good, dusty potato, unpeeled". Moreover, it was Van Gogh's heritage as a Dutch painter to use sombre colours.

March 1, 1937

Even in this early period we see evidences of Van Gogh's great technical ability. The green of the coat is reflected on the flesh areas and the neutral background is composed of a subtle blending of all the colours used, resulting in an exceptional tonal harmony. The paint is applied in thin coats without the later impasto, and is built up of tone over tone, achieving very definite form and mass. Already the typical nervous brush stroke is seen in the building up of the bone structure of the head and in the background.

The Gallery is proud to welcome this distinguished example of the early period of Van Gogh to the permanent collection. In its sympathetic and understanding handling it is more than a study and is the portrait not of a model, but of a friend. In appreciation of its beauty as the expression of a great artist, we can agree with Vincent, "It has not been in vain that I spent so many evenings with the miners, and the peat diggers, and the weavers and peasants, musing by the fire."

MARCH LOAN EXHIBITION: "Modern Painters and Sculptors as Illustrators", the most exciting and completely satisfying exhibition ever staged by the Museum of Modern Art, will fill the loan galleries for the month of March. It has a most universal appeal, and will be enjoyed by lovers of watercolours, prints, drawings and books. It is not generally known that many of the outstanding artists of the 19th century and the majority of contemporary painters and sculptors have done illustrations for fine books, many of them special and limited publications.

Ambroise Vollard, the art patron and connoisseur, was one of the first and the greatest contemporary publisher of illustrated books. In 1900 he published Verlaine's Parallelement with illustrations by Bonnard and since that time has commissioned such well-known men as Redon, Rouault, Picasso, Maillol, Dufy, Derain, and Chagall to carry out illustrations for him. Preliminary studies, prints, and books with the work of all these men will be included in the exhibition. In this field, the lithographs made by Manet for Poe's "The Raven" and the recent etchings and drawings by Matisse for Joyce's "Ulysses" will be of particular interest.

England has published some very fine illustrated books, such as the Honesuch Press Genesis with wood engravings by Paul Nash and the Golden Cockerel Press Canterbury Tales with wood engravings by Eric Gill. P. Cassimir of Berlin has published several of the works of Goethe with illustrations by Barlach the sculptor, and such men as Kandinsky, Kokoschka, Liebermann and Slevogt will be represented.

In America Scribner, Random House, Black Sun Press, Spiral Press, and Harper have all turned their attention to illustrated books and have employed such well-known artists as Peggy Bacon, Alexander Calder, Charles Demuth, Ernest Fiene, William Glackens, Rockwell Kent, and John Sloan. Of particular interest will be Thomas Hart Benton's drawings for Huberman's We, the People and Grant Wood's crayon drawings for Horn's The Farm on the Hill, two of which were included in an exhibition at the Gallery last October.

It is planned to open the exhibition on Sunday, February 28th, and it will continue through the month of March.

WEDNESDAY EVENING LECTURES: On Wednesday Evening, March 3rd, the lecture will be devoted to the loan exhibition, Modern Painters and Sculptors as Illustrators. It will be given by the director and will include a background of the history of illustrated books and will be illustrated with the examples in the present exhibition.

For the remaining Wednesday Evening lectures in March, Mr. Gardner will continue the series of talks on the History of Furniture. These are proving exceptionally popular and an excellent attendance has continued in spite of the very unfavorable weather. They are appealing to students who come in groups and take notes, to decorators and to those for whom the beauty and patina of old furniture will always have a fascination.

On March 10th, England of the 17th century will be considered. This will include not only the Jacobean furniture of James I and Charles II, but also the Restoration and the very individual William and Mary Style.

March 1, 1937

March 17th, Queen Anne and Early Georgian, that is, the first half of the 18th century, will be discussed, on March 24th the very important and ever interesting Chippendale style with its many phases and on March 31, the Adam, Hepplewhite and Sheraton styles that reflected the classical influence of Louis XVI furniture, and which were copied so extensively in the American Colonies.

These lectures all start at eight o'clock and are given in the Atkins Auditorium. Examples from the collection are used to illustrate the various styles. There is no admission on Wednesday Evenings, either to the Gallery or to the lectures.

PRINTS: The very interesting and comprehensive group of Daumier lithographs will continue on exhibition until March 15th. Composed entirely of proof impressions, it includes many of the "Law Officers" series, in which Daumier's bitter denunciation of the injustice of the courts is seen at its best. More amusing and kindly in their humour, are the "Better Things of Life" and the "Married Life" series. These sheets prove the extraordinary fact that Daumier's wit is as telling today as it was in the 19th century when the plates were made.

Beginning March 15th, the Print Club will sponsor an exhibition of Piranesi's "Prison" series. The group of fourteen will be composed entirely of first states, which are exceedingly rare. "Le Carceri", as they are called, show that Piranesi was the greatest designer of architectural plates in the history of prints, and are the outcome of a great interest in perspective. These first states were done early in the artist's life and are not to be confused with the reworked third state. Their inspiration is unknown, they are almost unique in the field of art, and show the greatest possible flights of imagination. In them, Piranesi achieved a marvelous effect of light and a feeling of colossal spaces and his handling is almost impressionistic. It will be one of the most interesting groups of prints yet shown, and will remain on view until the middle of April.

FRIENDS OF ART: The Society is now entering its third year, and is increasing its activities. Many of the members are collecting and the modern drawings and watercolours in last month's exhibition came largely from them. It is hoped that all the members are reading the Art Digest which is included in their subscriptions, and which comes twice a month. In the February 15th issue, of particular interest are the editorial on "Drawings", a finely written and illustrated article on the Art Institute Midwestern Show, and a review of Walt Kuhn's one man show, the first he has had in several years.

The Study Class under the leadership of the Director is growing in attendance and this month will meet on March 3rd and 17th at 11 A.M. At the first meeting, the Loan Exhibition of Illustrations will be discussed.

GIFTS: An important and interesting collection of 18th and 19th century watches has been presented to the permanent collection by Mr. Harry M. Evans, a former resident of Kansas City.

They illustrate in a fascinating way the development of the watch from a large and awkward ornament to the very necessary time-piece of today. By the 18th century, the crystal, the hour and minute hand and the use of jewels in the movements had been developed. They were all wound with a key through the face of the watch and kept fairly accurate time. In this period the finest workmen painted and enameled the elaborate cases which often were inlaid with precious stones and which reflected the Chinese influences so noticeable in all the arts.

They are beautiful examples of craftsmanship and were meant to be worn as a definite ornament, as it was not until the 19th century that they were carried in one's pocket. The very tiny watch is not a modern invention, as one of them measures barely one half inch in diameter. A number of well-known makers, such as Baillon of Paris, are included in the group which has been placed on display in the East Corridor on the second floor.

March 1, 1937

A Mother and Child in bronze by the contemporary Mexican Artist, Guillermo Ruiz which was included in the February loan exhibition, has been presented to the Gallery by Mr. Gerald Parker. It is the first modern sculpture that has come to the permanent collection and will be placed on exhibition in Gallery XXX. It is very typical of the characteristic work which is being done by Mexican artists in fresco, stone and bronze and in its heavy, massive proportions, reflects the Aztec heritage of that country.

STAFF ACTIVITIES: Mr. Laurence Sickman, the Curator of the Oriental Department, has gone to Denver to give a series of lectures on Chinese art. He will lecture in Boulder and Colorado Springs before his return the middle of the month.

On March 2nd, the Director will go to Lincoln, Nebraska, to address the Regional Conference of the Junior League on Educational Work in Museums.

CALENDAR FOR THE MONTH OF MARCH

- Wed., March 3, 11:00 A.M. - Friends of Art Study Class - Modern Painters and Sculptors as Illustrators
- Wed., " 8:00 P.M. - Modern Painters and Sculptors as Illustrators - Mr. Gardner
- Wed., March 10, 8:00 P.M. - English Furniture of the 17th Century - Mr. Gardner
- Wed., March 17, 11:00 A.M. - Friends of Art Study Class
- Wed., " 8:00 P.M. - Queen Anne and Early Georgian Styles - Miss Jackson
- Sun., March 21, 3:30 P.M. - Concert by Tau Chapter of Sigma Alpha Iota
- Wed., March 24, 8:00 P.M. - The English Chippendale Period - Mr. Gardner
- Sat., March 27, 10:00 A.M. - A Marionette Play based on the life of Miss Cruttenden, the subject of painting by Francis Cotes in the Gallery Collection. Written and produced by the Advanced Marionette Class.
- Wed., March 31, 8:00 P.M. - The Adam, Hepplewhite and Sheraton Furniture Styles - Mr. Gardner

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